"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN A RURAL COMMUNITY**

By Frank W. Price*

A young Chinese minister from the city was visiting the minister of a rural parish. He walked with his friend to a village where some Christian farmers were making mud bricks for a little chapel and evening school. He saw the country minister work along with the farmers and help them in the building of their village house of worship and service. Finally he, too, took off his long robe and began to carry mud bricks. One young farmer watched him intently for a while and then said, "Pastor Chiang, you are a scholar and a guest. If we were building this house for ourselves we would not let you soil your hands by working with us. But since this is a house for God we are glad for you to have a share in the labor." The city minister told me that the few hours with those farmers, toiling with his hands for God, and having a part in the making of the little church, marked a high spiritual experience in his life. He had not realized so clearly before that labor and sweat and earth may be holy. The dedication of that mud-walled, straw-roofed, village chapel in the making was as real and beautiful as the dedication of a great and completed cathedral because the village builders were conscious of working with God.

The Kingdom of God comes in the rural vocation when the human-divine significance of the rural vocation is seen and felt and expressed. We work for God! We work with God! A Christian farmer can say that not only when he is building a village chapel but in all of his daily labor. In what other vocation are the three elemental forces--as the Chinese call them--Heaven, earth and man, brought more closely together? "K'ao T'ien ch'ih fan (By Heaven we eat)," says the Chinese peasant. By sun and air, by rains and snows, by winds and waters, by Heaven-sent seasons, by the power of Heaven in all reproduction and growth, by Heaven we live. By the God of Heaven, adds the Christian, the God of Heaven and of earth and of man. "We are fellow-workers with God." Where is that more evident and true than in agriculture and in the various occupations of rural life? No wonder that in China and in all agricultural lands the religion of the people, the popular faith, is closely associated with the work of the farmer and the natural forces with which he must deal. In our Christian faith God's Kingdom comes as we see the sacredness of our task; as we consecrate all labor on the soil, all nurture of growing things, all of our tiny part in on-going creation, to God, the Source of all life, the Everlasting Creator; as we say with the Master Workman of our race, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." This is not a truth we make, but a truth we discover--that we can be partners with God in the creating of His world. The Kingdom comes as we consciously and joyously realize this truth.

Robert L. Calhoun in his great book, "God and the Common Life," urges us to recover the sense of vocation as a "calling." In our machine age we are in danger of losing our faith as we work. We release powers and begin to think that we are all-powerful. We carry on our little rounds of duties and fail to see their cosmic relationship and meaning. We are engrossed, especially those who live in

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cities, with things and machines. The rural vocation can keep alive in us, in the men and women of our generation as of past generations, the realization of our utter dependence on a wisdom and power greater than our own. In labor on the land we touch the mysteries of birth and of life, of death and of resurrection, as nowhere else. We see and feel although we cannot explain the miracles of growth. Growth, slow, steady, gradual--"first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear." And growth, wonderfully sudden, as when trees quickly leaf in the warm days of spring when buds suddenly burst into flower, when the grain turns yellow and ripe for the harvest, and when childhood changes to youth.

I like to think of Jesus as a farmer as well as a carpenter. From his parables, from his love of the out-of-doors, from his appreciation of the beautiful in nature, I am sure that he plowed as well as made plows. I am sure that, like Chinese village carpenters, he helped in the fields during the busy season. I am sure that he let the good soil, rich and fertile and life-giving, the soil that would produce thirty-fold, sixty-fold and a hundred-fold, slip often between his fingers. I am sure that he knew what labor on the land meant, as well as labor at the bench. "One soweth and another reapeth," he said. "Others have labored and ye are entered into their labors. " "He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal; that he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together." He experienced that as a carpenter-farmer and he could apply the truth later to all labor--all labor is sacred in the light of the Eternal. We work out what God works in. The Kingdom comes with that faith. The Kingdom will be realized as sower and reaper rejoice together, as all who serve mankind upon the soil are freed from oppression and fear and as the dream of the old prophet comes true, "Every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall make them afraid

The Kingdom of God comes in the rural community as it rises to higher levels of mutual helpfulness and service. The natural rural community is interdependent. People know each other and help each other. In China the family and clan and village neighborhood are bound together with innumerable common interests, and groups of villages about common centers like the market-town or temple form what we call communities. The Chinese term for society, she-hwei, comes from a word meaning village worship societies, village religious communities. How much there is to build upon in the village community in a land like China! The common mills and threshing floors, mutual aid in planting and in irrigation, ancestral halls of the clans, festival seasons which bring the people together in social life and recreation, community temples and common worship days and pilgrimages. Quarrels and feuds, too, yes, but the community bonds are too strong to be broken by them. Here and in rural communities all over the world, where men and women of the soil live and work and play and worship intimately together, you find the soil in which the Christian fellowship can most easily grow.

I shall never forget one evening that Muriel Lester spent at our Rural Training Center in Shunhwachen near Nanking. After supper we took her to a village where the people were sitting under the moonlight in an open courtyard. As we came near we could hear strains of fiddle and flute music. The villagers gave us a warm welcome and we sat on benches in a circle. The people sang for Miss Lester their "Good Neighbor Song," new words written by one of our staff to an old Chinese tune and expressing the spirit and hopes of the new rural community in China. Miss Lester asked them questions and then told them something of her life and work and of how she believed the common working people of the world wanted peace and could together make a new world. The children gathered about her, drawn by her happy face and melodious voice. The rough-faced farmers listened with rapt attention, seeming to realize that they were a part of that larger world community of which she spoke. When Muriel Lester left the next morning she gave me one of her little books and on the fly-leaf was written, "A bit of the Kingdom." That evening in a Chinese village had been to her a "bit of the Kingdom," a promise of the Kingdom that is to come. Lift up

your heads, O ye village gates, and be ye lifted up, ye doors of peasant homes, and let the King of Glory come in! Let the Kingdom of God come in, Kingdom of love and mutual service, Kingdom of mercy and of brotherhood, and transform our natural rural communities into "beloved communities," God's own societies out of which shall some day be born the greater community of many races and peoples. A new heaven and a new earth cannot come apart from new rural communities in which God dwells and reigns.

The Kingdom of God comes in rural worship. If Nature is one of the roads to God, then it should be easier to worship in the country where earth and sky make a great cathedral, where trees are spires, where the "birds of the air, and the lilies of the field" tell us of the Father's care and remind us to "seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness." It is not by chance that Buddhist temples in the East are found in lovely valleys, on wooded hillsides, by murmuring streams, near some grand mountain scenery. Beauty and religion go together. We Christians are called to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. We are beginning to see afresh the rich possibilities in rural worship. The church may be very humble and small but in its setting, its form, its furnishings, it should be something more than a little copy of the city church. When the worshippers come from their country homes, their fields and orchards, their animals and their rural handicrafts, let them feel that their daily life and tasks are consecrated by their house of worship and by the form and spirit of their worship.

I think this is why rural churches in China are feeling their way to new forms of worship. I have never felt so near to God as in some little village chapel near the fields. A cross on a table, a few scrolls on the wall, some backless benches, but it all belongs to the people and to God. Songs, not merely translations of our western hymns but more and more Christian verse set to Chinese music, throbbing with the pain and joy, the longing and hopes of country life, and rich in rural imagery. I think of the line in one hymn, "He is the spring wind and I am the grass; let Him blow." And of that hymn with an old ballad tune which Christian farmers in many parts of China now sing as they go to their work. The first stanza goes, "Wearing our straw hats and carrying our hoes, We go to our fields, Praising the Lord." In Shantung and other provinces village Christians are singing whole sections and chapters of the Bible to old tunes that have come down through the centuries. To hear the Twenty-third Psalm thus chanted by a country congregation is to be moved to tears. On Easter of last year I was with Frank Brown of Suchowfu in one of the rural churches of his missionary field. The Christians streamed in from the villages and filled the little chapel to overflowing so that we met in the yard outside. Each one came with a wild flower in his hand and greeted his fellow-Christians, "Ye-su fuh-ho liao, Jesus is risen!" More and more the rural churches of China are giving the festival the place it deserves, the church festival and the Christianized native festival. I have spoken out of my own experience in China but you can find parallels in this and other countries.

The Kingdom of God begins to come when men and women and children on the land, when those who toil with their hands and help to feed and clothe mankind, find and worship God where they are. In their simple homes, in their gardens and fields, in the churches they have helped to build with their own materials and labor, on festival days of the year, at times of planting and of harvesting, individually and in groups, they draw near to God "in whom we live and move and have our being." They come with the soil of their hearts plowed by suffering and struggle, made tender by pain and hope, ready to receive the sun and the rain of God's truth and forgiveness and love and power. Wherever there is such worship--and I believe it can be more real and more fruitful among rural folk than among any other--the Kingdom of God is coming.

The Kingdom of God comes in Christ-like rural leadership. I am not afraid of the word, "leader." I believe that we need leaders and that rural com-

munities need leaders. But intelligent leaders, far-visioned leaders, unselfish leaders, Christ-like leaders, who go among rural folk "not to be served but to serve and to give their lives." Leaders who can say, "We preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." Leaders with knowledge and self-discipline, with sympathy, with endurance, with humility, with love.

We have watched a rural reconstruction movement rise like a mighty tide the last few years in China. Many educated young men and women have gone into that movement with enthusiasm, as agriculturalists, as teachers, as doctors and nurses, as social workers. And many have left for the cities again after a year or two. Or they have stayed for the salary only and not for the love of the work or the people. But we have seen others stay because they were working for a cause, because they saw a vision, because they loved the people, because they wanted to serve, or because they were "constrained by the love of Christ." The Kingdom of God comes in such leadership.

In recent years I have had a small share in the training of ministers for rural churches in China. I have spent months with these young men, not only in the class room but also in villages, on the farm, among the country folk. So far as we know every man who has been through this special Rural Church course is staying by his job, even in the midst of war. Some of us are bound together in a little order we call "The Sheaf." We know that rural leadership is costly. To be a worthy rural leader demands strong qualities of body, mind and soul. We must win, not force the love of the people. We must prove that we are their friends. We must combine scientific knowledge and social passion. We must think, work, pray in such a way that the Kingdom of God may come on earth, among the people who till the earth. The Kingdom of God cannot come unless there are more Christ-like leaders for our rural communities.

One of our students in Nanking Seminary, from a wealthy city home, wanted to take the Rural Church course. I discouraged him at first because he did not have the background of rural life. But he felt the call to this service. The first two years of class-room study were easy. The first summer of field work was hard. He had to spend several weeks in a strange village and share the life of the people. His bed was hard, his food was rough, he could hardly sleep for the mosquitoes. But this lad from a cultured family held on. He got to know all the people of the village, he worked with the young farmers in their fields and organized classes and recreation for them in the evening. He brought several as inquirers to church. He was especially successful among the children and when he left there was an active boys' club in the village. A year after his graduation he returned to Nanking Seminary for a conference and I went with him out to this village where he had served his apprenticeship. Some boys saw him and called out, "Mr. Tsao has come back!" Soon all the children of the village were gathered about him. Tsao Kwang-tsu stood there with tears running down his face. He turned to me and said, "They love me, they love me! I'll never leave the rural ministry." That region was heavily bombed in the Japanese advance on Nanking last December and those same children who had been attracted by Christ-like love were scattered by violence and hate and fear.

In the rural vocation when its divine possibilities are appreciated, in the opportunities for mutual helpfulness and service on higher Christian levels, in rural worship of the God of heaven and earth, in rural leadership which serves in the spirit of Christ--the Kingdom of God comes.